

AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY COUNCIL

# SPECIAL REPORT

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## IS PUTIN'S COLLAPSE POSSIBLE?

EVGENII SAVOSTIANOV



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**EVGENII SAVOSTIANOV** held a number of senior positions in the first post-Soviet government of Russia. During the country's August 1991 coup attempt, Savostianov played a leading role in defeating the pro-communist putsch, before personally shutting down the headquarters of the Communist Party of the USSR. From 1991 to 1994, he headed the Moscow Office of the State Security Service as a representative of the liberal-democratic community. Subsequently, from 1996 to 1998, he worked as deputy head of the administration of President Boris Yeltsin. Savostianov is the author of numerous books, among them *Secret Services on the Edge* (2017) and, most recently, *I Shut Down the CPSU* (2023).

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The stability of Vladimir Putin's Russia in the face of mounting Western pressure over its military adventurism in Ukraine has both perplexed and stymied policymakers and scholars. Yet the regime erected by Russia's strongman over the past quarter-century is far more fragile than it appears. Today, the Russian government is buffeted by both internal and external pressures that could ultimately lead to its downfall. Putin's early popularity, rooted in economic growth and pseudo-patriotic fervor, has steadily eroded. The ongoing war in Ukraine has failed to rally lasting public support, and its prolonged nature has inflicted immense human, material, and reputational losses. These failures have exposed significant weaknesses within Russian society and its governance structures.

Key challenges facing the regime today include:

1. **Divisions within the country's elite.** The once-loyal "old elites," who amassed vast wealth under Putin, have turned resentful due to significant losses as a result of the war and Western sanctions. In response, Putin has sought to cultivate a new, and presumably more loyal, elite drawn from the ranks of military veterans and other loyalists. In the process, he has generated both tension and competition within the upper echelons of Russian leadership.
2. **Conflict between the military and the security apparatus.** The Russian Ministry of Defense and the FSB, which is central to Putin's power, are increasingly at odds. Each blames the other for failures in Ukraine, with tensions exacerbated by events like the abortive mutiny carried out by Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin in the summer of 2023, which revealed key fractures in loyalty among the ranks of the country's military.
3. **Economic struggles.** The current war with Ukraine has fundamentally impacted Russia's economy, creating inflation, generating labor shortages, and reducing investment. Industrialists and financiers, while competing for influence, are united in their desire to end the conflict. However, this goal remains unattainable as long as Putin remains in power.
4. **Regional dissent.** The Kremlin's weakening grip on power is evident in regions like Chechnya and Siberia, where local leaders and populations show increasing dissatisfaction with Moscow's authority. Economic shifts and mounting losses in the war have further strained the relationship between the center and the periphery.

Nevertheless, Putin's regime remains buoyed by elite loyalty, pervasive repression, and his own personal security apparatus. However, these sources of support are under increasing strain. Mounting military and economic pressures, coupled with the potential for further mobilization or elite defections, could fundamentally destabilize the regime. And historical precedent suggests that the collapse of such a system, if it occurs, will be both sudden and dramatic.

# IS PUTIN'S COLLAPSE POSSIBLE?

**T**he question of why totalitarian regimes suddenly and unexpectedly collapse has long perplexed researchers, generating no shortage of post-mortems and scholarly analyses after the fact. Accurately predicting the longevity of such regimes is a risky enterprise, and the subject of this report – an examination of how close the regime created by Russian President Vladimir Putin might be to its downfall – is inherently speculative in nature. Yet, as a direct witness to the collapse of the Soviet Union, I have a clear sense of how the sudden collapse of seemingly unshakable power can occur. What follows is my best assessment of the current state of Putin's regime, drawing on both general observations and extensive personal experience.

To begin, it is necessary to understand the natural life cycle of regimes such as the one created by Putin. In the early stages of totalitarianism, when the masses still enthusiastically and unconditionally support a tyrant, a collective mindset congeals. I refer to this frame of mind as the “Gracián Trap” after the 17th-century Spanish dissident monk Baltasar Gracián. His adage, “Better mad with the rest of the world than wise alone,” succinctly captures the conformity of a populace (whether coerced or natural) that emerges as a result of a period of peace and prosperity.

At this stage, the fact that this relative well-being comes at the cost of lost freedoms and forfeited rights does not trouble the overwhelming majority of people. Meanwhile, a skeptical minority, capable of seeing further ahead and understanding that the loss of freedoms will inevitably exact a steep price, is cowed into silence. At such moments, dissent is seen not merely as opposition to the tyrant himself, but as defiance of the people writ large.

Inevitably, however, the bill comes due. Over time, the people face poverty, oppression, and death on battlefields where wars are fought to defend the ego and vanity of the tyrant. At this point, the mood of the majority shifts dramatically and the era of late totalitarianism begins, marked by a populace that is critical or even hostile toward the tyrant but, due to disunity fostered (and encouraged) over the years is afraid to express its dissent.

This is where the “Gracián Trap” comes into full effect. Each individual believes he or she is alone in their doubts, while in reality such thoughts resonate with the rest. At this stage, a crucial cross-roads emerges: the system may either languish in prolonged stagnation or evolve into a revolution. The latter scenario can transpire when, prompted by a dramatic event (such as the self-immolation of Jan Palach in Czechoslovakia in 1969 or of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia in 2010) or the emergence of a charismatic leader (like Iran’s Ruhollah Khomeini or Russia’s Boris Yeltsin), a shared sense of unity takes root among the people based on the realization that the status quo is untenable.

From here, events may unfold along several trajectories, many of which have been observed within the former Soviet Union.

1. The ruling elite initiates reforms, gradually adapting the country to new conditions. For example, in Ukraine, Moldova, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, local communist leaders transferred power to national-democratic movements in a smooth and relatively peaceful manner.
2. The ruling elite commences reforms, but loses control of the process and withdraws from power as new centers of authority emerge. The most striking and illustrative example of this scenario is the collapse of the Soviet Union itself.
3. A popular uprising begins to overthrow the elites, often fueled by waves of national or religious self-determination. Events in the Soviet regions of the Caucasus serve as a prime example.
4. The regime implements a “tightening of the screws” policy, intensifying repression. This, however, typically only delays the crisis temporarily, leading to an eventual radicalization of the populace and making scenario 3 above the most likely outcome (as seen in the Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union, especially Tajikistan). In turn, several factors play a critical role in the collapse of a regime. They include: divisions within the ruling class; the sentiments of the middle generation, and; jealousy of foreign neighbors.

Paradoxically, divisions within the ruling elite can arise not only during periods of deep decline, but also in the face of impending success. For example, in February 1917, Russia’s Emperor Nicholas II was removed by his inner circle, which feared that a looming victory in World War I would strengthen the Czar’s absolutist tendencies and indefinitely delay the implementation of essential reforms.

Revolutions, meanwhile, typically become possible when youthful protests begin to attract participation from middle-aged and older generations as well. This was evident in early 1989, when Mikhail Gorbachev’s “revolution from above” gave way to a popular democratic revolution. Photographs from that time vividly illustrate the broad range of ages among those participating



in the mass anti-communist protests. The economic, social, and humanitarian progress of neighboring countries, when contrasted with the stagnation and decline of one's own society, breeds distrust in the existing system and its leaders, and amplifies the attractiveness of alternative models of governance and different ways of life in general.

## PUTIN GOES TO WAR

During the first eight years of his rule, President Putin enjoyed the genuine and near-unanimous support of the Russian people. This backing was fueled by an atmosphere of fear created by the 1999 bombings that took place in major Russian cities, and Putin's resolute promise to defeat terrorism. The rapid economic growth of those years likewise helped bolster Putin's standing, leading to tangible improvements in the lives of tens of millions.

The period from 2008 to 2014, however, brought gradual disillusionment. Economic growth slowed significantly, and even declined, while living standards stagnated or fell. Obvious machinations to retain power—such as the theatrical use of Dmitry Medvedev as a placeholder president until 2012—as well as the suppression of independent media and the growing sense of individual powerlessness all contributed to an erosion of Putin's image.

The annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine provided a potent shot in the arm for the president's popularity. In a wave of pseudo-patriotic fervor, orange-and-black “St. George's ribbons,” the official symbol of aggression and military triumph, appeared everywhere. Images of the “polite people”—the special forces troops who seized Crimea—and the “little green men,” undesignated Russian soldiers who took over parts of Eastern Ukraine, enjoyed widespread popularity. The battlefield triumph even led some to entertain the idea of reclaiming Alaska as well.<sup>1</sup>

However, like with any other artificial stimulant, the effects quickly wore off. The dire state of the national economy could only be partially offset by the Kremlin's effort to hype the narrative of an unsullied Russia surrounded by the dark and corrupt forces of the West. Putin's position, though, was bolstered by the inexplicable blindness of European leaders, who—despite being competent financial managers—proved shockingly naïve in their assessment of Russia's strategic direction.

As always, though, objective circumstances prevailed over subjective ones. The mounting domestic crisis of confidence in Putin became increasingly apparent. His regime sought to suppress it through the murders and repression of opponents, the rollback of remaining civil rights, and constitutional manipulations that effectively cemented his lifetime rule as a dictator. The culmination of this trend was Putin's decision to depend on a familiar strategy, that of fomenting a “short, victorious war,” and set his sights on Ukraine anew.

Had the Ukrainian people conformed to the image crafted for Putin by his intelligence agencies and propagandists, or had President Volodymyr Zelenskyy accepted U.S. President Joe Biden's



Source: Shutterstock

offer to flee instead of resisting, events might have unfolded just as Putin planned. Ukraine would have been conquered, and a frightened Europe—disarmed through the policies of its own leaders—would have been ready to make significant concessions. And once again, the Russian people would have rallied around Vladimir the Victor.

That, however, did not happen. A thousand days on, it is evident that Putin’s plan failed and Russia is embroiled in a prolonged war without a clear purpose, entailing enormous human, material, and reputational losses. All of this has created visible fractures in Russian society—fractures which continue to grow as the conflict drags on.

## DIVISIONS IN RUSSIAN SOCIETY AND THE RULING CLASS

Even in the early days of the war that began on February 24, 2022, there was no popular euphoria. The official symbols of aggression—such as the St. George’s ribbon, and the letters Z and V used as tactical markings of the invading forces—were rare and barely noticeable.

A heavy-handed campaign of pressure on Russian society soon followed. This included the public removal of children from families deemed “unreliable,” arrests for any expression of doubt in Putin’s right to wage war or annihilate Ukrainians, the encouragement of mass denunciations, the

glorification of murderers, and mandates for teachers to indoctrinate students with chauvinistic and hateful propaganda.<sup>2</sup>

All of this had only a limited effect, however. By June 2023, during the short-lived mutiny by one-time confidante Yevgeny Prigozhin and his mercenary followers, it became clear that Putin held no genuine public support from the populace. Across the expanse of the country, not a single person rallied in defense of the president or the state he had built. Their ambivalence underscored a sad reality. Russia today is a society whose citizens view the country's fate as detached observers, concerned only with avoiding personal involvement or threats. Protests against mobilization for the Ukraine war have thus been similarly tepid, often reduced to demands that one's own relatives be spared, rather than calls to end the war itself, which is the root cause of mobilization.

Russian public sentiment today can be classified roughly as follows:

- Up to 15% despise Putin for his inability to achieve a decisive victory in the war.
- Another 15% hate him for starting the war and dragging the country toward imperialist stagnation.
- Some 20-25% are actual beneficiaries of the war.
- The remaining 50% is indifferent, so long as they are left alone.

Meanwhile, the so-called elites have failed to provide a reliable foundation for Putin in this crisis. On the day of Prigozhin's abortive coup, for example, planes carrying officials and their families fled Moscow for foreign destinations.<sup>3</sup> Those who stayed behind, meanwhile, sought to lay low and ride out the political storm.

In calmer times, these individuals—frantic in competing for access to official funds or to gain proximity to the dictator—fiercely battled one another. They formed factions, alternately supported and betrayed one another, and vied to outdo each other in expressions of loyalty and devotion to the leader. But during the most fateful hours, the silence was deafening. Deputies and mayors, ministers and generals, all seemed to vanish from public view. Thus, both society and the elites have largely turned their backs on Putin, exposing a hollow system that struggles to withstand its own contradictions.

## A CLASH BETWEEN OLD AND NEW ELITES

For his part, Putin is acutely aware that he is surrounded by people who have become extraordinarily wealthy during his quarter-century in power. Over the years, vast sums derived from the sell-off of Russian resources (primarily oil, gas, minerals, and land) have been funneled to a small circle of individuals personally selected by Putin and a handful of his close associates. The resulting fortunes were largely invested in Europe, in things such as real estate, yachts, private jets, football clubs, and luxury goods.

Yet, within months of the start of Putin’s “Special Military Operation” in February of 2022, this elite lost much of what it had amassed. While mansions outside Moscow and along the Black Sea remain, villas in the Riviera and Alpine châteaux are now out of reach. Most of the wealth of this elite is likewise inaccessible, and the jet-setting lifestyles to which they and their families had become accustomed have been drastically curtailed. All of which has bred significant resentment toward their former benefactor on the part of Russia’s new rich. Few, if any, share Putin’s delusions about global domination, nuclear war, or the complete defeat and humiliation of the United States and the West.

Still, Putin remains a central figure on a number of grounds. First, because the delicate balance of relationships this elite has cultivated will collapse the moment Russia’s president exits the stage. Russian history amply demonstrates that, once that happens, no arrangements relating to harmonious coexistence will protect them. Following Lavrentiy Beria’s elimination in 1953, the group that orchestrated his death fell apart within five years, leading to Khrushchev’s rule and the dismissal of many of his “co-conspirators.” In turn, a similar purge occurred following Khrushchev’s removal, with key players instrumental in his ouster quickly sidelined.

The second reason for their residual loyalty is a fear that any resulting instability could bring entirely new forces to power. Those newcomers, in turn, might hold each of the current crop of elites accountable for crimes committed during their time close to the dictator’s inner circle.

Putin understands these dynamics well. It is no coincidence that, even at meetings with his closest associates, no one is allowed to sit near him, and even closed-door sessions are held with doors ajar and guards stand ready. This distance, both literal and symbolic, underscores the distrust that has come to define Putin’s relationship with those who owe him everything—and who now secretly long for his downfall.

It’s also why Putin has increasingly emphasized the importance of a “new elite” drawn from the military personnel involved in the invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, he has systematically prioritized these veterans for state benefits, preferential economic treatment, and – increasingly – political favors.<sup>4</sup> The idea is clear: those who profited under Putin’s patronage but have lost much in recent years are to be replaced by new individuals who will now go on to profit from supporting Putin (and thus will ostensibly be more loyal). This logic, incidentally, also governs the promotion in recent years of members of Putin’s personal security team to senior federal and regional positions.<sup>5</sup>

By contrast, the “old elites” are now preoccupied with defending their positions against the looming threat of displacement. This growing tension represents one of the central fault lines within the country’s leadership. It is a confrontation that will inevitably intensify unless – or until – the resistance of the “old elites” is completely crushed.





Source: Shutterstock

## A CLASH BETWEEN MILITARY AND CIVILIAN ELITES

Since the mid-1990s, the Russian military has been structured based on a basic (and reasonable) set of assumptions. The first was that a war with the West was impossible, and unnecessary. Second, a conventional war with China was considered unfeasible due to the imbalance of forces between Moscow and Beijing, with nuclear deterrence consequently serving as the primary countermeasure against any Chinese threat. Finally, the assumption was that conflicts with Islamic radicals and nationalist movements in Russia's "underbelly" (its southern regions and Central Asia) would resemble special military operations, to be conducted utilizing relatively modest expenditures of forces.<sup>6</sup> This framework justified maintaining limits on the size of the country's armed forces and focusing on keeping units in a state of constant combat readiness.

The invasion of Ukraine fundamentally contradicted this logic. The Russian army was woefully unprepared for anything resembling a large-scale war. Recognizing this reality, some commanders tried to raise the alarm in the media in the run-up to the conflict. But war preparations proceeded nonetheless. Predictably, the miscalculation became glaringly apparent by the end of the war's first week, amid massive Russian military losses. Before long, the country's military leadership began to strongly recommend a mobilization to Putin, who was personally directing the operation at the time. Putin, however, understood the devastating impact such a



Source: Shutterstock

decision would have on his reputation and therefore delayed taking action for as long as possible. At one point, he placed his hopes in his “chef,” Yevgeny Prigozhin, who proposed solving the manpower issue by sending some of Russia’s most hardened criminals from its prisons to the front lines. But this proved to be, at best, a stopgap measure.

When it was finally carried out in the Fall of 2022, the mobilization had a predictable effect, resulting in a mass exodus of over a million young men from Russia.<sup>7</sup> Their exit answered a critical question: does Russian society support such a decision? The answer was quite clearly in the negative.

Since then, for more than two years, Russia’s military leadership has consistently called for further troop reinforcements through additional mobilizations. Their appeals are grounded in a stark reality: the combination of contract soldiers and pardoned convicts that Russia has relied on so far barely covers battlefield losses and is insufficient for building reserves.

These demands face significant political and economic resistance, however. The unpopularity of such a measure is obvious, and inside Putin’s circle there is clear recognition that another mobilization would further erode the president’s reputation, perhaps catastrophically. Meanwhile, economic authorities, already grappling with a labor shortage that has placed significant strain on the country’s economy, oppose further mobilization on practical grounds. They argue that



another large-scale exodus of young people—whether to the frontlines or into exile—could push Russia’s precarious economy past its breaking point. Regional and local governments, including national republics, share in this opposition.

At the same time, both military and economic authorities appear to agree on one point: that there is no viable path forward for Russia’s military campaign. In this respect, they represent covert opposition to both Putin and the war itself, which continues solely under his will to imperial power. These tensions between military, political, and economic factions will only intensify as Russia’s military apparatus and economy continue to erode under the strain of prolonged conflict.

## TENSIONS BETWEEN THE MILITARY AND THE FSB

The Russian military is also engaged in a growing conflict with Putin’s primary security apparatus, the Federal Security Service (FSB). Back in 2014-2015, the two institutions competed for recognition over their respective roles in undermining a weakened Ukraine. This rivalry resulted in a division of labor of sorts, with the Ministry of Defense (MoD) tasked with overseeing the occupied territories of Luhansk while the FSB assumed control over the occupied areas of Donetsk. And before the 2022 invasion, the FSB played a critical role in shaping Putin’s perception of the situation in Ukraine. It worked alongside a range of independent experts, political analysts, and think tanks reporting to the Presidential administration. Together, they crafted the illusions that shaped Putin’s decision-making.

When the initial invasion plan failed, the FSB and the MoD began blaming one another for the debacle. At the start, the country’s military leadership appeared to have the upper hand with their argument that operational setbacks were the result of flawed strategic plans rooted in FSB disinformation and Putin’s overconfidence. Indeed, by late 2022, it had become clear that the attempted blitzkrieg had collapsed, forcing Russia to pivot to more conventional strategies, including mobilization.

But the dynamics shifted with the intervention of Putin’s personal confidante, Yevgeny Prigozhin. On the one hand, Prigozhin unleashed harsh criticism at Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov for what he termed to be their ineptitude and venality.<sup>8</sup> On the other, he became a rallying figure for the right-wing faction within the military. Initially, these individuals criticized Putin for a perceived lack of decisiveness and brutality. Over time, however, the staggering losses led some to question the war’s purpose altogether and consider whether the real enemy might be the corrupt and incompetent national leadership.

As a result, Prigozhin’s June 2023 mutiny garnered considerable support among the military. The Air Force, under the command of Sergey Surovikin—a general sympathetic to the rebellion—took little action to stop the Wagner mercenary columns advancing toward Moscow, or their movement toward a nuclear weapons storage facility in Voronezh. Other parts of the Russian military similarly refrained from engaging the insurgents.

By contrast, once the immediate threat of Prigozhin’s rebellion had passed, the FSB aggressively



Source: Shutterstock

pursued and dismantled its remnants, eventually turning its focus to eliminating its participants. This shift allowed the FSB to reclaim its status as the dominant security force in Russia. Since then, with Putin's approval, the FSB has increasingly persecuted and removed senior military leaders. In a development that demonstrates the true balance of power today, the Ministry of Defense building is now guarded by FSB personnel.

The top brass of the Russian military therefore understands that repression is a matter of time. Among them, there is likely a growing desire to strike preemptively against their adversaries, a sentiment that is fueled by the temporary successes achieved by Prigozhin's abortive mutiny. That, in turn, is likely a portent of things to come, and the power struggle between the military and the FSB will invariably intensify as the end of the war draws closer.

## CONFLICT BETWEEN FINANCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL ELITES

Despite surface-level indicators of stability—including a substantial trade surplus, GDP growth, and rising disposable incomes—crisis conditions in the Russian economy are worsening. Two key conflicts underlie this turmoil. The first is the struggle between financiers and those who contribute to agriculture, industrial production and other “real” economic sectors. The second is the growing divide between families who have benefited from substantial financial support



as a result of the war effort (among them military families, defense industry workers, and some residents of mono-industrial military towns, accounting for up to 25% of the population) and everyone else.

For instance, the tensions between Central Bank Chair Elvira Nabiullina and Sergei Chemezov, a close Putin ally and de facto leader of the country's military-industrial complex, have become increasingly public.<sup>9</sup> Russia now faces a stark economic dilemma: whether to tolerate high inflation or to tighten business conditions to the point of widespread bankruptcies. For the time being, the specter of runaway inflation has led Putin to side with Nabiullina, but the consequences of this choice are already evident in reduced investment activity and GDP stagnation.

Nevertheless, both factions understand that the root cause of the crisis is the war. The economic militarization it has necessitated, the sanctions that have isolated Russia's financial system, the labor shortages, and the lack of repatriation of export revenues are all consequences of Putin's continued prosecution of the Ukraine conflict. This situation, in turn, has created a paradox: while industrialists and financiers fiercely compete for Putin's favor, they are united in their desire to end the war—an outcome that is unattainable without removing Putin from power.

## A STRUGGLE BETWEEN THE CENTER AND THE REGIONS

Tensions between the Kremlin and so-called “federal center” with Russia's assorted regions have been an undercurrent of Russian politics for some time now. Against the backdrop of the war, the issue has risen to the forefront in areas directly impacted by the conflict, such as the Belgorod and Kursk regions. One striking example is the recent public outrage at a local official who fled the area without organizing evacuations, leaving residents to fend for themselves.<sup>10</sup>

A more telling episode occurred during the September 2022 mobilization announcement. Publication of the presidential decree was delayed for several hours due to difficulties finalizing Protocol No. 3, which allocated mobilization quotas among Russia's regions. Governors contested the figures assigned to their respective territories, lobbying for reduced quotas.<sup>11</sup> This adversarial process revealed the underlying tensions that exist among the regions, as well as those between the regions and authorities in Moscow.

In the national republics, there is now a pervasive sense of the Kremlin's weakening grip. The most prominent example in this regard is Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov. His request for air defense systems for Chechnya<sup>12</sup> can be interpreted as a preparatory step toward the republic's sovereignty in the event of a severe weakening of central authority. Meanwhile, neighboring regions, feeling increasing pressure from Chechnya, have begun to openly clash with Kadyrov. A notable example is the recent dispute between Kadyrov and Dagestani senator Suleyman Kerimov, which escalated into the formal declaration of a blood feud.<sup>13</sup> Anti-Chechen sentiment also flared

during the funerals of Ingush men killed by Kadyrov's forces in a mafia-style conflict in Moscow over control of a large business similar to Amazon.

A deeper and currently less visible issue involves Siberia's evolving economic orientation. For decades, the external economic activity of the USSR and subsequently Russia followed a simple logic: raw materials were extracted in Siberia and exported to Europe via the European part of the country, creating a unifying economic interest. However, as more and more goods are exported eastward to China and the Asia-Pacific, Siberia's economic incentives to remain tied to European Russia have diminished. Instead of benefits, Siberia now primarily receives tax bills and the coffins of its fallen citizens.

This growing disconnect poses a significant, albeit delayed, threat to the cohesion of Russia as a unified state. The conflict, though, will likely remain latent until there is either a collapse or a substantial weakening of central authority in Moscow.

## POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE

As we can see, behind the imposing facade of the Russian regime lies a web of serious internal conflicts, the severity of which may be vastly underestimated. However, as noted earlier, many of these conflicts could be resolved if Putin were to leave power.

Will that happen? For the reasons outlined above, the sudden collapse of Putin's regime, if it happens, should not come as a surprise. A solitary and increasingly unsuccessful autocrat, Putin is separated from this outcome by only a few weak and fragile barriers, among them the loyalty of his thousands-strong corps of personal security, the court elite's fear of personal losses (or loss of station), and the pervasive fear of the Russian state's boundless repressive machinery.

Yet, this delicate structure could crumble overnight. Mounting military and economic hardships, including a new mobilization, could well ignite widespread public dissatisfaction. Or the old elites, recognizing the impending threat of their eradication, may overcome their mutual animosity and distrust and decide to act decisively.



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# ENDNOTES

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# AFPC RUSSIA AND UKRAINE PROGRAM

Founded in 1982, the American Foreign Policy Council's Russia Program was one of the first private initiatives in Washington to establish ongoing connections between American officials and the upper echelons of the political leadership in the Soviet Union and, subsequently, the Russian Federation and Ukraine.

AFPC's work helps policymakers in Washington understand the political dynamics taking place in Russia and the "post-Soviet space," and assists them in crafting appropriate responses.

## UKRAINE

For more than two decades, AFPC has sponsored or co-sponsored conferences focusing on Ukraine's political and economic evolution. Senior government officials of both Ukraine and the United States regularly participate in this conference series. In the wake of Russian aggression in Ukraine, AFPC has increased its traditional Ukraine-oriented activity to include briefings for Members of Congress and specialists in the executive branch of government, Congressional testimony, and speeches before public and private audiences.

## DELEGATIONS TO AND FROM RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

For more than 30 years, AFPC has sent delegations of senior officials and statesmen to Russia and Ukraine, and welcomed reciprocal delegations to Washington. American participants have included former Cabinet and sub-cabinet officials of both Republican and Democratic administrations. However, in light of Russian actions in Ukraine and aggressive conduct in other parts of Europe, we have suspended trips to and from Russia. At the same time, we have expanded the number of our trips to Ukraine and the number of Ukrainian officials we meet in Washington. These discussions cover all aspects of our bilateral relationship and the resulting information helps AFPC present policy options to those who can make or influence U.S. policy.

## RUSSIA POLICY MONITOR

Since 1992, this weekly publication, the *Russia Policy Monitor* (formerly *Russia Reform Monitor*, archived on the AFPC website) has provided brief summaries of important current events in Russia. All items are referenced and linked to the original source material.





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